

Jean-Marc Masseaut

Educational Director for the Shackles of Memory Association's Study Center and Editor of the Annual Journal "Les Cahiers des anneaux de la memoire" (Shackles of Memory Journal) - [www.lesanneauxdelamemoire.com](http://www.lesanneauxdelamemoire.com)

*This talk was given at Kingsley Plantation on Saturday, February 9, 2008. It is transcribed and presented here with permission from Mr. Masseaut.*

## **The Transatlantic Slave Trade**

When Christopher Columbus discovered the Americas at the end of the fifteenth century, the coasts of Western Africa had been visited by the Portuguese since the beginning of that century.

They had a navigating secret.

When one sails down south along the coasts of Morocco and Mauritania, it is impossible to sail back by the same way, against the prevailing wind.

It is necessary to go west in the deep blue sea to catch the SW wind which brings sailing ships back to Europe.

It was very audacious to go so far off shore and it was that experience of making "La Vuelta" in the Atlantic Ocean which allowed the discovery of the New World. "La Vuelta" means the turn. Thus it was the point in a voyage where the ship turns, taking advantage of the winds and currents.

Before the discovery of the Americas, Portuguese sailors developed commercial relationships between Western Africa and Europe. They brought different goods from Africa, like ivory and slaves.

So the beginning of the African slave trade by the Europeans was the transportation of Africans to feed the servile work force market of the Iberian Peninsula (Portugal and Spain) and of the Mediterranean world.

This new technology of navigating sailing ships allowed Europe to compete with the Arab slave trade which transported slaves through the Sahara desert.

Christopher Columbus traded on the western coast of Africa. He experienced sailing in the Atlantic Ocean with the winds and currents. He also experienced the Slave Trade. So when the European sailors discovered the Americas, they already had experienced trading African slaves for the benefit of Africans and for the benefit of Europeans. They developed that practice for the benefit of the colonization of the Americas.

## **The Building of the Slave Trade and its Peak in the Eighteenth Century**

The Europeans colonized the Americas, discovering new lands, imposing their strength and their way of life on the Native Americans. This required an increasing work force. The number of European immigrants was not sufficient. Forced immigration from Africa fed the New World with forced workers. It provided huge benefits to those who transported the African in their floating jails.

The slave trade became an important activity in the port of Nantes during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The maritime countries of Europe, Portugal, Spain, France, England, and Holland were all present in the Americas. The western coast of Europe developed the trade of colonial goods like tobacco, corn, sugar, between the Americas and Europe. But the production of colonial goods depended more and more on the work of African slaves.

So, to maintain trade with the colonies, Western Europe developed the slave trade. The most important ports were Amsterdam, London, Bristol and Liverpool. In France the most important were LeHavre, Nantes, La Rochelle, and Bordeaux. On the Iberian Peninsula, it was Lisbon.

Most European ships traveled directly from Europe to the Americas and back. But many of the European ships went first down south to the African coasts to load African prisoners. These incarcerated young men and women were transported over the ocean in these terrible voyages with no return. It was called the middle passage.

These people disembarked and were sold in the Americas. The slave ships then went back to Europe, loaded with colonial goods. The slave trade was also called the triangular trade.

The ecological system of North Atlantic permitted to Christopher Columbus to reach the Americas and come back to Europe. It was that ecological system of winds and currents that allowed such rudimentary ships to transport so many African prisoners over a long time.

The port of Nantes joined the triangular trade at the very end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This port was not a pioneer in the slave trade but it became one of the leaders like Bristol and London. It was less important than Liverpool and Lisbon. The port of Nantes did 45% of the French slave trade. The Nantes slave trade lasted during the whole 18<sup>th</sup> century and during the first third part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, even though the slave trade was made illegal at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

About 1800 slave ships from Nantes transported between 400,000 and 500,000 Africans during that period. From Liverpool there were more than 3,000 slave ships. These ships were ordinary European merchant ships. They could sail directly to the Americas, to the

Indian Ocean or to the African slave trade. They became slave ships when they loaded African prisoners along the African coasts.

The seamen who signed on the merchant marine ships could be sent directly to the Americas or to the slave trade, depending on the maritime labor market.

There were 50,000 sailors who signed on Nantes slave ships during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

There were 100,000 sailors who signed on French slave ships.

There were more than 300,000 sailors who signed on British slave ships.

There were more than 500,000 sailors who worked on slave ships during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

This is a very important population.

The first seamen on Nantes' slave ships came from the coasts of Nantes. But they also came from the other coasts of France and Europe like the Baltic Sea, Scandinavia, the North Sea, the British Isles, the Iberian Peninsula, and the Mediterranean Sea as far as Genoa, Venetia, and Greece. A few of them came from Quebec, Boston, Louisiana, Martinique, Guadalupe, and even Africa.

This shows that the slave trade was not a minor activity isolated in few European ports.

The slave trade fed the European economy. The iron bars and weapons exchanged with African prisoners on the African coasts came from France and from England. The textiles for the exchange came from England, and also from India. The food loaded in Nantes to feed the crews for more than a year and the hundreds of African prisoners on each ship during several weeks or several months were produced in the country of France. The sugar produced by the African slaves went to sugar refineries in Nantes but also along the Loire River as far as Orleans, which is close to the Paris market. Thousands of workers were employed in businesses dependant upon the slave trade and slavery.

In Nantes the slave trade was interrupted only by wars, especially against the British.

During the American War of Independence that you call the Revolutionary War, most of the seamen of the area of Nantes were required by the French Royal Navy to fight against the English with the American patriots. Some of them could have been, by chance, slave trade sailors.

## **Abolition**

The 18<sup>th</sup> century was also the century of the enlightenments. The British Enlightenment started at the very end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Scottish Enlightenment spread out all over Europe and in France, through the French ports.

The complete inhumanity of the slave trade became obvious at last, but the acknowledgement of the human dignity of the Africans did not follow.

When the French revolutionists wrote the universal declaration of human rights, and Africans were rhetorically included among the Universal human community, they were still slaves in Santo Domingo (the actual Haiti).

I want to be precise that for 80% of Nantes slave ships the destination was Santo Domingo.

And it was not the French Revolution which gave the freedom to the Haitian slaves. It was the slaves who forced the French Revolution to admit their freedom. The Haitian revolution was a very symbolic historic event. It was the outcome of the permanent refusal of the servitude by the slaves themselves.

From the depth of the African countries aboard the European slave ships, and on the American lands, it was always been necessary to chain, to hit, and even murder these people to compel them in servitude. The revolts on the ships and escapes on land were always a threat for slave traders and slave masters.

So abolition came about:

- From the radical opposition of the slaves themselves,
- From the non productive system of slavery,
- And from the progressive consciousness of human dignity which made the slave trade illegal first, and later slavery itself illegal.

The first abolition of the slave trade was voted by the British Parliament in 1807.

The slave trade from Nantes continued until 1830.

To stop the centuries of slave trade and slavery it was necessary to fight with laws, and also weapons, during the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Memoire (Memory)**

It is that heritage that we are trying to understand and to face in a port like Nantes and in many other places all around the Atlantic world.

It is not easy for all of us.

But in our association, the Shackles of Memory, like many people all around the Atlantic world, we consider that this past, even if it has been so tragic and traumatizing, must be known and not hidden any more.

We must first respect the memory of the victims of that secular tragedy.

This past must be known also because it is how our world of today has been built.

And for those who wish to live in peace and in a mutual respect, it is necessary to know where we are coming from.

That can help us to develop what is now common culture and destiny based on our many origins.

And in conclusion:

- This past demonstrates that in spite of everything, our societies can change.
- And this past demonstrates that in spite of everything, human dignity never surrenders.

---

Prepared and presented by Jean-Marc Masseaut for his talk at the Kingsley Heritage Celebration, February 9, 2008.

Edited for the web by Carol S. Clark, Park Ranger, and Betsy Tyrol, Park Volunteer.



National Park Service  
Timucuan Ecological & Historic Preserve  
Kingsley Plantation  
11676 Palmetto Avenue  
Jacksonville, Florida 32226  
904.251.3537  
<http://www.nps.gov/timu>